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ABSTRACT

The impact of an activist counseling intervention delivery system for students with low academic achievement histories in an open admissions college is assessed. Students ranking in the lower half of their high school class and scoring below the 50th percentile on college entrance examinations were divided into two groups. Seventy-five students received active counseling, initiated by a counselor, throughout a fall quarter, and 77 students used counseling methods, if at all, through the usual methods of self- and other referral. At the end of the academic year grades and retention information were examined for these students. Results showed that while students receiving the active counseling delivery system did not receive higher grades or complete more credits, they did persist in school longer. Implications of activist counseling for low achieving, nontraditional students are discussed. (Author/MSE)

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Activist Counseling For Academically Underprepared University Students

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Abstract

This study assessed the impact of an activist counseling intervention delivery system for students with low academic achievement histories in an open admissions college. Specifically, students ranking in the lower half of their high school class and scoring below the 50th percentile on college entrance examinations were divided into two groups. Seventy-five students received activist counseling, initiated by a counselor, throughout Fall Quarter, and seventy-seven students utilized counseling services, if at all, through the usual methods of self and other referral. At the end of the academic year, grades and retention information were examined for the students. Results showed that while students receiving the active counseling delivery system did not receive higher grades or complete more credits, they did persist in school longer. Implications of activist counseling for low achieving, nontraditional students are discussed.

Activist Counseling For
Academically Underprepared University Students

Historically, university counseling services have taken a relatively passive stance to helping students learn about their services. Students are usually informed of the services through a variety of means including freshman orientation, student handbooks, and notices posted around the campus. These practices implicitly assume that advertising the services suffices to bring students who need counseling (and perhaps would benefit from it the most) to seek it voluntarily. While generally there does not appear to be a lack of student use of counseling services (Kirk, 1973), several authors point out that major student subgroups such as ethnic minorities and persons from lower socioeconomic groups make little use of counseling services (Vontress, 1969, 1974; Warnath, 1972; Winer, Pasca, Dinello, & Weingarten, 1974). Among the reasons identified for the lack of use by these groups are the students' perceptions of counseling as a middle-class status quo activity which supports the institution rather than the individual, the formalities involved with counseling (e.g., making appointments) and prior negative experience with helping professionals.

While research does not show major differences between student counseling center users and nonusers (Berdie and Stein, 1966; Rossman

and Kirk, 1970), for the most part these studies have been conducted at universities with selective admissions and with student populations that are relatively homogeneous academically as compared to institutions with open admissions policies. Counseling, an essentially verbal, intellectual, and middle-class activity, may be most attractive to academically well-prepared students who share these characteristics. In an open admissions institution, students who are weaker academically may be the ones least likely to seek counseling voluntarily. Thus, counselors in open admissions colleges may not be serving many students who could benefit from counseling the most. These students, whom Cross (1974) describes as the "new students," include minorities, returning women, people with low income backgrounds, and academically underprepared students. The very nature of counseling services and the characteristics of those that staff them may initially discourage nontraditional students from using the services. For example, in a survey of all Extended Opportunity Program and Services students in California community colleges, Friedlander (1980) found that students who rated themselves as either above average or average academically were more likely to take advantage of college support services compared to those students who rated themselves below average. Therefore, a more active approach

on the part of the counseling staff may be needed to serve these students.

Several programs throughout the United States have been using an activist counseling approach to deliver services mainly to their academically underprepared clientele. They include the Academic Advancement Program at UCLA (Anderson, 1976), the State University of New York SEEK Programs at Brooklyn College (Obler, Francis, & Wishengrad, 1977) and Buffalo (Haettenschwiller, 1971), and the People Center at Staten Island College (Hannam, 1977). A common characteristic of these programs is that they actively seek out the student for counseling rather than passively wait for the student to find the counselor. For the most part, reports indicate that the students in the programs succeed academically and remain in school longer than similar students not in the programs. Since the programs include elements other than activist counseling, it cannot be assumed that counseling alone is responsible for their success. However, counseling is described as an integrated, active component of the entire program package. Another approach to activist counseling was initiated by Glennen (1975) at the University of Nevada. He refers to it as Intrusive Counseling; in this program, selected faculty advisers call in all incoming freshmen and transfer students

periodically throughout the year depending on the students' academic progress. Glennen reports that the faculty-initiated contacts have reduced freshmen attrition from 45% to 6%. He also claims that more students have made the Dean's List and that fewer have been placed on academic probation and dismissed for academic reasons during the time that Intrusive Counseling has been in operation.

These programs suggest that an active counseling intervention which seeks out students may be especially valuable for low achieving, underprepared students. Such a program was initiated on a pilot basis in the General College at the University of Minnesota on the hypothesis that, compared to a group of similar students, the students receiving active counseling would be more likely to remain in school and receive higher grades. The formation of this hypothesis found support in a General College student survey which showed that 32% of the students believed that the struggles of getting started lasted too long into the quarter and 50% of the students felt that several days should be added at the beginning of the quarter to allow more time to work out academic programs. It appeared that a large number of students were experiencing adjustment problems of one type or another at the beginning of a quarter and perhaps were not locating college and university resources fast enough to serve their neeeds.

These students may then become academic casualties by leaving the university before fully taking advantage of the help available.

Method

Background

The General College is the open door, primarily two-year college of the University of Minnesota. Admission to the College is available to any high school graduate, and sometimes to non-high school graduates. A high percentage of General College students have low academic achievement histories (mean high school percentile rank at the 35th percentile), approximately 20% come from ethnic minority groups, and the average age is 23 years.

Sample

All General College freshmen admitted to the College for Fall, 1978, constituted the population for this study. Students in the lower half of their high school graduating class and scoring below the 50th percentile on the College's entrance examinations in arithmetic, organizational ability, and the verbal section of the School and College Ability Test (SCAT) were selected as the sample for the active counseling intervention. Persons who could be identified as non-high school graduates and non-native English speakers were excluded from the sample. The 160 students in the sample were

randomly assigned to either an experimental or control condition. The two conditions were matched on sex, high school rank, and entrance examination variables. The 80 students assigned to the control group were identified but no contact was made with them. The experimental group was divided so that each of two counselors was responsible for 40 students. Again, experimental students assigned to the counselors were matched on sex and academic variables.

Procedure

During the first week of the Fall Quarter all students in the experimental counseling group (75 students actually enrolled) were contacted by letter and asked to make a counseling appointment with their assigned counselor. Students who did not respond to the letter were telephoned or given messages through their classroom instructors. During the first counseling session, the role of the counselor was explained, the student's questions were answered, and a general discussion of the student's initial adjustment to the college and university took place. Each student was asked to make a commitment to meet weekly with the counselor. If a student did not keep an appointment, the counselor contacted the student by telephone or letter. The counselors also attempted to make student contact informally in the corridors and student gathering places. Counselors were very

persistent in keeping contact with the students assigned to them throughout the quarter.

In addition to contacting students, the counselors contacted all the students' instructors at mid-quarter and near the end of the quarter. These contacts, in the form of a structured questionnaire, asked instructors to assess the student on the basis of classroom attendance, class participation, quality and promptness of work, and basic skills such as reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, and study habits. Students were informed of these counselor-instructor contacts in advance, and instructor assessments were shared with the student (with the instructor's knowledge) during the counseling sessions.

The nature of the counselor-student counseling sessions varied somewhat with the student and the particular counselor. However, initially the counseling sessions tended to focus on the student's adjustment to the College and university, the appropriateness of Fall Quarter courses, and information about available college and university services. The counselor was supportive and in many cases was the only staff person whom the student knew and could turn to for help in a large unfamiliar university environment. As problems of an academic or personal nature arose during the quarter, the

counselor was available for assistance or for making referrals. The counselor was also available to help with course planning for the next quarter. One of the major goals during this, the student's first quarter, was to facilitate the student's adjustment to the university. The counselors encouraged the students to use other campus services and make regular contact with their faculty adviser. In many cases the counselor would actually walk the student to a referral agency and introduce the student to appropriate personnel. In other cases a telephone contact with the referral source was made. Finally, the counselor made follow-up inquiries of the referral to assess the extent to which the student found it helpful. A major component of the counseling intervention was teaching the student how to use existing services on the campus. Therefore, the counselor was not only providing immediate crisis assistance but also instructing the student about university survival skills which hopefully would prevent future problems from becoming unmanageable.

Two counselors were employed 20 hours per week specifically for the active counseling intervention. Each counselor had familiarity with the university and the College, and had some graduate training in counseling. They were supervised by the authors who were faculty affiliated with the Reading and Writing Skills Center and Counseling

Center of the College.

At the end of Fall, Winter, and Spring quarters, the experimental and control groups were compared on: (a) grade point averages (GPA) based on a scale of A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and all noncredit symbols (i.e., N, I, W) =0; (b) the percentage of credits completed; (c) the number of credits registered Winter and Spring quarters; and (d) the percentage of students that registered during Winter and Spring quarters.

Results

Table 1 reports the means of the GPA's, percentage of credits completed, number of credits registered Winter and Spring quarters, and the percentage of students that registered Winter and Spring quarters. There were not any significant differences between the groups on these three variables. However, 90% of the experimental group registered for either Winter or Spring or both quarters compared to 77% of the control group, and 83% of the activist counseling group registered for both quarters compared to 70% of the control group.

Discussion

The activist counseling approach to delivery of service did not influence the standard measures of academic achievement (GPA and credits) compared to a more traditional delivery system. However,

the activist approach did influence the degree to which the students persisted in school. Students who received activist counseling were more likely to be in school at the end of the year compared to students not receiving activist counseling. In addition, students felt positive about the program. They indicated that it helped them to feel more comfortable in the environment and to locate university services easier. They also liked having a counselor assigned to them to go to for assistance and to monitor their progress. Fewer students, however, indicated that the activist counseling actually helped them achieve better academically.

Students in both the activist counseling and control groups entered the college with weak academic backgrounds. Their mean high school percentile rank was at the 26th percentile and the mean college entrance placement examination scores were at the 25th percentile and below compared to other General College students. This data suggests that a brief counseling program of this nature may not be intense or long enough to affect GPA and credits completed, although it seems to provide enough support to keep students persisting in college. Especially for nontraditional students, many variables enter into a student's academic achievement, variables that are beyond a counseling program's control. Whether or not a

student achieves may depend on factors which a counseling program cannot change in a relatively short time, such as problems of a financial, environmental, or motivational nature.

Future programs of this type may be strengthened by providing a more intense and longer experience which includes structured group components focusing on study skills, career development, and personal problem solving. These additions over the entire academic year may show greater changes in academic achievement for students with weak academic histories. Combining an activist counseling model with academic skill development and careful course planning could be a powerful combination to improve the academic success of underprepared students.

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Table 1

GPA Means, Percentage of Credits Completed, Credits Registered, and Percentage of Students Remaining Registered For Activist Counseling and Control Groups

	Activist Counseling		Control	
GPA	N		N	
Fall	75	1.78	77	1.67
Winter	68	1.64	64	1.54
Spring	65	1.44	54	1.37
Percentage of Credits Completed				
Fall		76%		72%
Winter		72%		68%
Spring		62%		59%
Credits Registered				
Winter		13.0		13.1
Spring		12.3		12.4
Percentage Registered				
Winter		90.7%		83.1%
Spring		86.7%		70.1%